

# Why Johnny Can't Think

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It occurred to me the other day that this year's rather mindless Presidential campaign might be further evidence of the decline of American education. Maybe the candidates are giving us such a thin diet because our schools never taught us how to deal with anything more substantial.

Look at how we teach people to think. We have teachers stand in front of classrooms and think out loud, while the students listen.

It seems to me that expecting students to learn from such instruction is like expecting people to learn to play football by lying on a couch and watching it on TV. Schools don't teach football that way; they teach their students to play football by having them play football.

How come schools don't teach their students how to think by having them think?

Of course, that's what the students are supposed to be doing while the teacher is thinking out loud in front of them, but they seldom do. And, even when they do, they can seldom tell whether what they are thinking is sound.

All they can evaluate is how it makes them feel. That's perfect preparation for the sound bite on the evening news: you evaluate the candidate by how he makes you feel.

Can we do any better? We might consider an idea from an educational movement that started in Great Britain called "writing across the curriculum." It suggests that one way to make students think about something is to make them write about it.

Writing can help you learn. For example, suppose you're learning about the tides. There's five minutes of classtime left that the teacher might use to give you more facts.

But, instead, the teacher asks you to write a short letter to a 10-year-old explaining what causes tides. You might wonder what you would learn from doing that.

Would five more minutes of lecturing by the teacher, who knows the material, be more useful than five minutes of writing by a student who doesn't?

Not necessarily. For one thing, listening is passive, while writing is active. It's a lot easier to pay attention when you're being active. I don't know if you ever noticed, but it's a lot harder for teachers to fall asleep in class than it is for students.

When students are writing, they're doing something. It not only keeps them awake but, while they're writing, they're doing a very active form of thinking.

We learn to ride a bicycle through the activity of riding a bicycle and we never forget how to do it. Maybe if we learned to think by writing, we'd forget less of what we had learned.

Sure. I know students already do a lot of writing in school. They write essays and term papers. But those who advocate "writing across the curriculum" are suggesting a different kind of writing: writing to learn; writing to develop ideas; writing in all your classes (that's why it's called "writing across the curriculum"); the kind of writing you do when you write notes to yourself on the backs of envelopes; writing to help you think.

Suppose that when we were in school we had spent more time writing about what we were thinking and less listening to what others thought? We might have learned to consider whether what the candidates are saying makes sense and whether their ideas fit together.

If we were ready to do that, don't you think that the candidates would give us a different kind of campaign? Can you imagine what campaign speeches would be like if, at the end of each one, the entire audience sat down and tried to write a letter to a 10-year-old, explaining what the candidates had just said?